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THE PLACE OF COMMERCIAL STUDIES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL.¹

I WILL not attempt a philosophical or pedagogical discussion of the subject of commercial education in general, but will refer to the very complete exposition of the question by Mr. Cheesman A. Herrick, director of the commercial department of the Central High School, Philadelphia.² Some of his conclusions are: Business education is a demand of the times. The secondary school must widen its course and include commercial education. Commercial courses will increase the attendance at secondary schools. Business education is valuable and necessary. Value of special training is now recognized in all other lines of activity, and it is necessary as a preparation for business. Dr. Herrick also considers commercial education in foreign countries and points out the obstacles to its inauguration in this country.

In considering the place of commercial studies in the high school, I do not wish to enter, more than is necessary, into the question of electives in the high school. But that I may make the subsequent portion of this paper clear, I shall briefly give my point of view.

Often the pupil entering the high school is very much perplexed over the selection of studies, but the pupil and his parents will be able to answer such questions as these: "Do you wish to prepare for college?" "Do you wish to go to a technical school, or a medical school, or a normal school, or do you wish a good general education?" "If you are going no further than the high school and must immediately begin to earn your living after leaving the high school, do you wish to learn a trade, go into business or into a business office?" In other words, "What is your purpose?" This much, it seems to me, can be answered

¹Delivered before the Massachusetts High School Masters' Club.

²*Supplement to the Fifth Year Book of the National Herbart Society*, 1899. University of Chicago Press.

by the parents and pupil. Now, if the boy and his parents have no definite purpose for the future, it is very unfortunate for the *boy* if he enters the high school amid a mass of electives, hoping to hit on something that will please his fancy, or by chance to find his natural bent. He needs assistance right at this point. I am aware of the fact, too, that schools supposedly organized on the freely elective plan may set so many limitations that the freedom of choice is not more unrestricted than in the school that has many separate courses of study, allowing many electives within the courses and giving a good deal of latitude in the way of substitutions. Hence the question may become one of administration, depending simply upon the judgment of the school principal for a judicious solution. I feel strongly that the question "What is your purpose?" should be constantly before the boy's mind, and it seems to me that, when the answer is received, it is the duty of the school to point the way; and the way should be blazed so definitely that the pupils may follow it in logical order and sequence. The school, then, should be arranged on the elective *course* plan. The courses should be so co-ordinated that, if the pupil finds he is on the wrong path, he may change with as little loss of time as possible. His original purpose may have been to go to college, but he finds that he cannot learn Latin, although he has shown an aptitude for mathematics. He may then decide that he prefers the technical school. He should be allowed to change to this course without loss of time, provided he has passed his one or two years in the other course. This is given simply as an illustration of what must be done in the way of co-ordination of the various courses. I believe emphatically in an increasing number of electives in each course as the work of the third and fourth year is approached.

The commercial work should be given the same standing as any of the other courses. The way should be marked out in logical sequence for the pupil, and he should be allowed optional subjects in his third and fourth years, but should be compelled to select certain of the approved conservative high-school studies, such as a modern language and science *throughout the course*.

Carpenters	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
Machinists	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17
Firemen	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Farmers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13
Janitors	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
No ascertainable occupation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21

The persons to whom these students are responsible are as follows :

Fathers living	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	192
Widowed mothers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	25
Guardians	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11

Some of these parents are poor, hard-working people, who are determined that their boys and girls shall have a better start in life than they had themselves. This often means a hard struggle. They depend upon the high school to do this work. They do not consider the subject further, but rely absolutely upon the high school. The average citizen has absolute confidence in the public-school system, no matter how much he may criticise it. The high school must not be found wanting in the important task of educating those whose school work ends with their high-school course. I think we have failed to hold this class of pupils. These pupils will select an English course or a general course with no well defined purpose in mind. They realize all the time that when they finish their high-school course they must find employment. Upon entering the school they are usually impressed with the new conditions. They are impressed with the size of the school, and for a time will be earnest students. But they soon begin to doubt if this school work will bring them increased wages when they finally enter the business world. They cannot comprehend the purpose of the training. They begin to get restless, and the teachers now begin to put pressure on these boys because they are lagging behind the class. The boy may become disorderly or he may become a truant. At any rate, he either drops out of school or is sent out of school because we have failed to hold his interest; we have failed to impress him with the idea that he is getting real benefit from the school. We may tell a boy who says he doesn't see the use of studying geometry that the study of geometry is one of the

finest methods of mental discipline that has ever been invented, that this study is approved by the most prominent educators that the world has known. This statement makes no impression whatever on the boy's consciousness, and he will not believe that the ability to demonstrate a certain proposition in geometry will be of material aid to him in after life. The boy who is going to college may also be rather skeptical about the value of geometry, and inclined to shirk it. We have no need to explain, as in the other case, the wonderful mental development that comes to all who study this subject. We have only to say "You must do it because your college requires it." The purpose of his school work comes before his mind, and he proceeds to learn his demonstrations without protest. This may not be the highest motive educationally, nevertheless it is a powerful one. Right here the commercial course will supply a motive and a purpose for those who have not the strong incentive that the college boy has. We can show the pupil that he will become a more efficient and successful worker, a better citizen, and take a higher stand in the community if he completes his course. The boy believes this, for there is so much that is practical in the course that it appeals to him. The boy will stay to finish his course if possible. The reputation that the course is practical will gradually spread. Parents will believe that it is valuable, and large numbers who, hitherto, have begun work at the end of the grammar-school course, will come to us, and we shall have the opportunity to make them into better citizens.

The most important part of the work in the commercial course is to teach the boys and girls (and of course it is desirable in any other course, but it is a great necessity right here with this group of pupils) habits of promptness, obedience, reliability, and alertness; and in the beginning we try to impress the idea on the mind of every pupil, that if he ever expects to be successful, he must have all of these qualities. We try to impress upon his mind that the business man will not tolerate a lack of any of these traits of character. The boy sees the purpose of such instruction, and he will acquiesce more readily than he would if you attempted to teach him geometry in the same way. We

often hear school men say that bookkeeping and stenography are not educational, apparently thinking that this settles the whole question. Whether these subjects are educational or not depends, as in the case of other studies, largely upon the intelligence and skill of the teacher.

The teachers in the commercial department form a group by themselves, and each teacher is responsible for his subject, wherever used. If a boy uses poor English in some other subject, he is turned over to his teacher of English for correction. If his penmanship and mechanical work in English are slovenly, he is sent back to his teacher of penmanship for improvement. If he is inaccurate and slow in adding columns of figures in his book-keeping, he is turned over to the teacher of mental arithmetic for additional training, and he is taught that all of his work must be done in his best fashion.

I have in mind now a boy, one of those very slow boys, physically inactive, large, and apparently sleepy. He is in the commercial course. I can see the career of that boy in any of the other courses to be something like this: He tries his best to learn French and his English, but he is slow and it requires one minute for him to rise in his seat for a recitation; it requires three or four minutes for the teacher to draw the semblance of a response from him. The boy, as well as the teacher, is discouraged, and both teacher and pupil agree that his case is hopeless. In the mental arithmetic, greatly to the surprise of the instructor, after a few weeks' training he leads the class in rapid mental calculations; and one day, to test him, the instructor gave the mental problem with all the rapidity of which he was master. This boy was the only one to keep up with the instructor. In rapid addition made after the dictation of figures, if he succeeds in getting the figures written, he adds them faster than anybody else in the class. He is so slow, however, that sometimes he cannot get the figures down, and then he is beaten. The fact that the boy can do some kind of work better than his companions, is a revelation to him, and he is going to do all his other work very much better because he is gaining confidence in his own ability, and the commercial course has added one more

avenue by which the individual can discover the particular niche in which he belongs.

The commercial course, then, should be dignified by a name, and the various studies in it should be logically arranged as in other courses. The next problem to confront us is, What shall the course be? Shall it be a two years', three years', or four years' course? Shall we make it on the assumption that all pupils will stay with us four years, so that we may send them all into business life trained to the minute? This would be a comparatively simple program to arrange, and one in which the results would realize all our ambitions.

One of the four years' commercial courses that came to my notice in a somewhat extended investigation of the subject, which gave me very much help, was arranged for the Worcester High school. It is a four years' course, with the last year filled with commercial subjects. The first year, as I remember it, contained no commercial subjects, but was made up of the ordinary studies of the general course. The program seemed to be nearly ideal for those schools in which a four years' course could be demanded, and in which a large percentage of those who enter stay for the four years. But the high-school conditions in some cities will hardly allow of such a program if we wish to do the greatest good to the greatest number. In Lowell we have to deal with a large number of boys and girls who cannot stay with us four years. Fifty per cent. of our pupils drop out of school without graduation. The remaining 50 per cent. graduate either in the three or four years' course. For a long time we have given two diplomas—a three years' diploma for the pupil who satisfactorily completes three years' work in any course, and the other diploma for those who have completed four years' work. The same arrangement holds in the commercial course; that is, we give a diploma at the end of three years' work and at the end of four years' work.

It is evident, then, that we must allow a good deal of commercial work in the first three years if a large percentage drop out before completing three years. I will give the course as arranged for Lowell, not because it is an ideal course, but as an

illustration of a practicable working course that fits our own conditions and co-ordinates with the established courses of the school. It is as follows :

First year.—Algebra, mental arithmetic, commercial geography, penmanship, correspondence, bookkeeping, and English ; all prescribed.

Second year.—Bookkeeping, commercial law, commercial arithmetic, history, and English, prescribed ; French, geometry, physics, elective. One subject from the latter group to be taken.

Third year.—Bookkeeping, history, and English, prescribed. Stenography and typewriting, French, German, chemistry, physiology and astronomy, elective. From the latter group two electives must be taken.

Fourth year.—Stenography and English, prescribed. French, German, chemistry, industrial history, and economics, elective. Two electives must be taken.

The study of English in the course runs through the four years and is identical with the English in the other courses. The history is similar to the history work of the other courses, but it is all taught from the commercial point of view, stress being laid upon the history of the world as having been shaped by commercial and trade conditions.

The bookkeeping does not really begin until the second half of the first year, as the time is taken up in penmanship, spelling, and correspondence, and a general attempt to shape the mechanical work of the student so that he will be able to do his work accurately and neatly. Rapid methods in arithmetic are taught in connection with the bookkeeping in the entire course.

I will not discuss the question of equipment, which must be liberal and complete ; nor the question of teachers, who must be strong, well trained, and skilful. The course must be as exacting as any other course, and it will equal any course in educational value. Furthermore, I do not wish it understood that we have accomplished everything outlined in this paper, as our course has been in operation less than two years. I have tried to present some of the motives that guided us in the introduction of the commercial course as an important department of our high school, and will say that the results thus far have exceeded our most sanguine expectations, and that I have absolute faith in the future success of this department.

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